

## “丝路文博” 艺评

## A SOURCE OF LOVE

In the Chinese contemporary art world, many people claim there are too few Chinese artists who are engaged in feminist discourse. Nancy Ma's distinctive work identifies her significantly as the first Chinese feminist artist in Australia.

Ma explores the dynamics of the identity Chinese women. Her art communicates the cultural and social issues pertaining to Chinese women in our society. In recent years, her critique of inequalities in patriarchal society in China is apparent in all of her work.

Ma's 16-piece installation entitled *My Clothes, My Life* (2009) is a sequel to her previous artwork *Her Life, Her Clothes* (2007) in which she expressed her sympathy for women who were treated unequally in Chinese society.

A range of Qing-style women's Duen Sam (upper garment) was created to show how people's everyday wears denotes their membership in different social classes. Her artwork embodies the notion that Chinese women were treated unequally, irrespective of the social class they belonged to.

*My Clothes, My Life* incorporates the memories from the artist's childhood; the pain, the emotions

“ ART  
MAKING  
MOBILISES  
PENT-UP  
EMOTIONS,  
RELEASING  
THE ENERGY  
IN FORMS  
OF CREATIVE  
EXPRESSION  
... ”



Nancy and husband Alex Ma

and reparations associated with them. The artist articulates a personal narrative of her childhood experiences as a daughter in a traditional Chinese family.

This body of work takes as its premise the attitude of traditional Chinese culture towards the construction of 'gendered' roles. Individual pieces express the strength of the artist's feelings and the way in which her past is being integrated with her present. Collectively, it is a further expression of her empathy towards Chinese women – whom she considers as having suffered inequality in the past and still do today.

Nancy Ma's work is coherent and well-made with a close attention to crafting and construction of each piece. It is an innovative use of new techniques peculiar to her, such as the treatment of the egg, metal works, paper, video and worn clothing. She has clearly developed a high level of understanding of the material and has truly mastered the art of using thin clay slabs and the special firing process that are required.

Why clay? She explains: "The transposition of materials can shock viewers, detach them from reality and

provoke them to look twice and to think.

"Silk, cotton and textile dissolve over time; clay after firing lasts forever. Clay signifies rebirth. Clay after firing is even stronger than in its raw state; likewise, human beings, after experiencing hardship, grow stronger to take on challenges and face the world. Clay therefore becomes a metaphor for my emotional states of the journey."

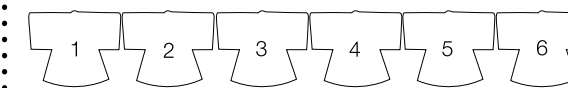
Ma addresses feminist art issues; many people see her as a feminist artist. The handicap of traditional cultural baggage has meant that Chinese female artists are more submissive than female artists in the West.

As a woman born into Chinese society, Nancy Ma feels feminism means rebellion – an absolute contradiction to what is expected of women in traditional Chinese culture and society. She still cannot shake this idea from her consciousness.

She says: "Although my work carries a feminist context, I am nevertheless reluctant to be described as a feminist artist. I have been enjoying my role within the domestic sphere (Confucians assignment of the role of women), which makes me proud to be a good wife to my husband and good mother to my son. At the same time, because I can also manage to receive recognition as a successful career woman, this makes me doubly proud of my achievements – not doubly burdened."

Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) once said: "The feminists took me as a role model [...] I don't consider myself a feminist. My husband, Robert Goldwater, was a feminist, he organized feminist demonstrations."

From this statement, it is realized that the idea of a feminist artist can sometimes be more about how people see you, than how you see yourself.



1. **Mixed-up: Struggle - She loves me or not, 2009**  
Paper earthenware, mixed media. 52x62x10cm
2. **Rebirth: Join all memories with happiness, 2009**  
Paper earthenware, underglazed, hand painted, aluminium, egg shells and mixed media. 52x62x10cm
3. **Don't hit the light bulb when fighting with your sister, 2009**  
Paper earthenware, glazed; broken light bulbs, light bulb holders, cables. 52x62x10cm
4. **Red Eggs – a new life is born, 2009**  
Paper earthenware, glazed; egg shell dyed with "flower red powder". 52x62x10cm
5. **The Armour – protect me from beatings, 2009**  
Aluminium, paper earthenware and mixed media. 52x62x10cm
6. **I only recognised "I" & "The", 2009**  
Paper, inkjet printout. 52x62x10cm